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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: CAMPAIGN PROMISES AND SYRIA: EGYPTIAN MEDIA
THEMES, OCTOBER 31 TO NOVEMBER 6

1. Summary: With Egypt's parliamentary elections scheduled for November 9, the pro-government media reported on several government initiatives such as a 20 percent bonus for government employees and a program to provide low-cost housing. Al-Ahram's editor-in-chief criticized the Muslim Brotherhood for making "all kinds of promises usually unfulfilled," while an independent commentator lamented the problem of "bribery" in Egyptian elections. Commentators continued to support Syria in light of U.N. Resolution 1636, though several voices critical of Syria emerged. The editor of pro-government Al-Akhbar wrote on November 5 that Syria should "respond to the resolution positively and transparently by refraining from the language of arrogance, challenge, and defiance the same language used by Saddam Hussein before Iraq's downfall." End summary.

2. November parliamentary elections: The pro-government media announced on November 3 that government employees would receive a 20 percent bonus in January, then announced two days later that Prime Minister Nazif would chair a Cabinet meeting November 8 to "discuss distributing half a million low-cost housing units to youths in installments over forty years." Allegations of vote buying continued to appear in the independent press and in opposition daily Al-Wafd (circulation: 50,000). Al-Akhbar (circulation: 800,000) quoted on November 5 Minister of Justice Mahmoud Abul Leil as saying that Egyptian civil society groups would not be allowed to "monitor," but could "follow up on" elections. The editor-in-chief of pro-government daily Al-Ahram (circulation: 750,000), Osama Saraya, wrote on November 3 that Muslim Brotherhood (MB) candidates were making "all kinds of promises usually unfulfilled in order to win votes." Saraya then criticized the MB for "mixing religion with politics and refusing to accept democratization." On November 3, Al-Akhbar's popular back page ran a cartoon of a smiling politician making promises to a cheering crowd: "I promise I'll make all your days feasts and I'll call for making the small feast fifteen days and the big feast a month and half." A columnist opined in independent daily Nahdet Masr (circulation: 25,000) October 31 that "even if everything in the coming elections is honest and transparent, the opposition will still not win, because the election's main problem is bribery."

3. Syria: Media commentary continued to focus on Syria and largely condemned U.N. resolution 1636. While several commentators continued to condemn international pressure against Syria as part of an "American" or "pro-Israeli" plot, more voices critical of Syria began to emerge. One liberal commentator writing in Al-Ahram on November 5 argued that Syria should "cooperate fully with the investigating commission." Another liberal commentator writing the same day in Al-Ahram criticized Syrian foreign policy as belonging to "the 80s and 90s and does not fit in with current international developments anymore and should be reconsidered." The editor-in-chief of Al-Akhbar also wrote on November 5, "Holding an Arab summit or criticizing U.S. policy is not the way to deal with Resolution 1636. The right way is to respond to the resolution positively and transparently by refraining from the language of arrogance, challenge, and defiance the same language used by Saddam Hussein before Iraq's downfall."

RICCIARDONE